

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

by

THEODOR HOLM

When asked by Celeste to write down my recollections of childhood life and family traditions, it did not immediately strike a chord, for who would be interested? This takes us back to Norway and into the last century when Britannia ruled the waves and Victoria was not only Queen and Empress, but stamped her name for decades on Western Civilization. Except for the brief war between Prussia and Denmark, Scandinavia had been at peace since the days of Napoleon. When and where I was a child the "War between the States" and England's Colonial Wars had been quite unreal.

So perhaps for this very reason, because life was so outwardly different from here and now — our "lifestyle" that we hear so much about — the "moderns" of today may overcome their general aversion to history and tales of the past and take some interest in what was "once upon a time" and actually ended when my parents moved away from my childhood home. So I shall do as asked, and all take pot luck.

First, the briefest family history. My father, Karenos Theodor Holm, was the second of three boys — they had no sisters. His father was a judge, descended from generations of merchants in Bergen. Father became a clergyman, his brothers both physicians. My mother's maiden name was Cecilie Gløersen, her father the fifth in a straight line of judges, dating back to the early 18th century. Her brother and his son, my cousin, also became judges. Father was born in 1845, mother in 1847. They were married in 1870, and Father's first appointment was as Assistant Parish Priest and Schoolteacher in Farsund, a small town on the southwest coast. In Norway "Religion" is a subject taught in schools, and by Religion is of course meant Lutheranism, the school system being administered by the Department of Church and Education. After some years there, he was appointed to his own parish in Askevold, located in one of the many fjords on the west coast, with Bergen the closest city. My five sisters and four of my brothers were born in Farsund and Askevold. In 1885 the family moved to Haa (pronounced Haw as in hawthorn) on Jaeren (pronounced Yairin) twenty-five miles south of Stavanger, where Danckert was born in 1886 and I two years later.

When clerical positions within the State Church were announced vacant, all interested clergymen would apply. There was a book in Father's study

describing every rural parish in Norway, as well as the parsonages -- the dwelling itself, the farm, and any special features -- for this was the "living", so essential to all applicants, and especially to a family of our size. There were great inequities. In some parishes the "living" was so meager that there were difficulties in filling the vacancies while others provided ample resources. Haa was in the latter category. However, considering these inequities and much opposition to tithing and obligatory offerings on the holy days, the entire arrangement was changed about the turn of the century: the parsonages were sold and the parish priests were put on salaries and given homes conveniently located to their churches. Haa was sold in 1906 after my parents had moved to another parish, Urskog, located east of Christiania (now Oslo).

Haa parsonage marked the end of the road from Naerbø railway station and the main church, about three miles inland. Father's "annex" church at Varhaug to the south was even farther away. He conducted services at these churches on alternate Sundays.

Our large one-story frame manor house, built in 1788, faced the North Sea less than half a mile away. There were gardens to the south and east, and the large courtyard was surrounded by various outbuildings, such as a carriage shed, fuel (peat) shed, sheepfold, stable, cowbarn etc. There was a large hayloft and a threshing floor, where during the first years flails were actually used for the threshing. Beyond the smokehouse near the kitchen entrance was another dwelling for the caretaker's family and his "hands", which also provided a large room for Father's confirmation classes, and where in summer the fishermen lived and made the nets. For in addition to the many activities of the caretaker, who was an able and experienced farmer, we had salmon nets in the sea directly outside the manor house.

It was a large farm compared with the others in the parish. I believe there was only one larger that had belonged to a wealthy family that had died out, and this was sold to two enterprising brothers who later also bought Haa. The farm provided our household with all we needed from what it produced: meats of all kinds, potatoes, flour etc., as well as feed for our horses and chickens. The caretaker delivered to us 19 quarts (18 liters) of milk daily in the summer and 12 quarts during the rest of the year. Cured meats of various sorts hung from the rafters in the attic, providing wonderful summer dinners.

And what a housekeeping it was! In the summertime we seemed always to have guests -- my parents' hospitality was proverbial -- and twelve to

fifteen at the dinner table was usual, as well as the "help" consisting of the cook, general maid, groom, and two fishermen. Looking back, the establishment seems almost feudal, but considering the times and our relative isolation from the rest of humanity, it seemed the only way to live, according to a small boy to the manor born! One day, I must have been five or six, one of the local young men from somewhere else asked me what kind of food we ate, and then following his own thoughts he said, "Nothing but eggs, I bet, and perhaps some peppermint cake." That was his idea of our basking in the lap of luxury!

As mentioned, peat was our fuel both for cooking and for the many individual heating stoves throughout the house. The parsonage owned a peat bog, located a few kilometers inland. I never saw it, nor was I ever told who spaded and stacked for drying the innumerable spadefuls of wet peat — I assume this was one of the caretaker's obligations — but on a Sunday in August Father would from the pulpit "invite" the congregation to help bring the by then dry peat to the parsonage. So on the appointed day there arrived a steady stream of one-horse carts, delivering altogether well over one hundred loads into the shed, and the drivers were given a simple meal and a thank you. To say that this response was enthusiastic would misinterpret the nature of our farmer neighbors, but it testified to Father's popularity among his parishioners and their substantial way to give it expression.

Our location on the shore in open flat country, bordered to the east and north by the Haa River and its estuary, not only provided the fertile fields but made the parsonage unique in that I am sure there was none other in Norway with a salmon fishery. Two fishermen, a father and son, whose home was some miles to the north of us, came every year to make the nets and tend them during the season, which was limited to the summer months. It was a regular ceremony for Father to weigh the catch. The fisherman would put the fish on the hook, Father manipulated the beam scale, and someone in the "gallery" recorded the weights. This had to be done right, for the salmon was sold to an exporter in Stavanger, and the fishermen worked on shares.

There were several good salmon pools in the river, and every year some Englishmen arrived for the flyrod sport. They became our good friends, and they caused my earliest attempts toward the English language. I was four or five when one day Danckert and I were lying in the grass watching one of them casting, standing near the shore in waders, water up to his buttocks.

I don't know whether Danckert was having fun with me or not when he told me to ask the Englishman what time it was, as we had to watch our dinner hour. Anyway, I went to the edge, doffed my cap politely and said, "Mister Dobbin, vat do you clock iss it?" He gave me a puzzled look, had a good laugh, and gave me the time.

There were no forests in our part of the country. We were told that there had been forests in Jaeren, which in past centuries had been cut down and sold to Holland for Amsterdam's underpinnings! During the heavy winter storms deckloads were torn loose and sent adrift from the ships carrying lumber and pit-props for the coal mines in England. Much of this, which had been loaded in Baltic ports, came ashore on the Norwegian coast, and what we salvaged was put to good use.

On New Year's morning, I think it was 1898, we saw to our great surprise a full rigged sailing vessel, sails all set, standing aground outside the mouth of the river. The crew had disappeared, we were later told that they had celebrated Christmas somewhat too thoroughly, and fearing the ship's immediate break-up had taken to the lifeboats and landed safely further north. The ship had apparently received serious bottom damage, for no effort was made to pull her off, and she did break up in a later storm. Her cargo of about 1000 tons of English coal was sold at auction for the equivalent of about fifteen dollars. This coal was driven ashore on the parsonage property over a period of many months, and the buyer left a considerable part of the salvage with us as an agreed payment for trespassing. We may have contemplated using this coal, which was stored, but we never did as it was not suitable for our stoves.

These winter storms tore loose large quantities of kelp from its anchorage on the rocky bottom, and in the early spring it had been driven ashore to form a solid fringe, in some places up to thirty feet wide. This had a limited use as fertilizer, but more important, large quantities were spread, dried, and burned. The ashes were exported to Scotland for the manufacture of iodine, and this was a valuable source of income for the caretaker. Several years, before we left for school in Stavanger, Danckert and I also had our kelp fires going, and I shall never forget the pervasive smell of that smoke! It is no Chanel.

I am sure that Americans visiting Norway are not generally aware that they are in roughly the same latitudes as Alaska and southern Greenland. The Gulf Stream, commencing in the Caribbean, angles across the Atlantic in a northeasterly direction and warms the western shores of Europe.

So on Jaeren, winter temperatures much below freezing did not last long, and snow only stayed a few days. Sometimes the river would freeze, but Father would not permit any skating there until the groom had first tested the ice using a pit-prop as a plunger. Apparently Father gave the groom more credit for common sense in an emergency than any of his children! But the late autumns and long winters were dark, windy and raw, so with his constant travels within the parish Father's life was not easy.

My grandmother Holm was widowed in 1889 and died in 1892. My earliest childhood memory is of her. She was then blind. In the dining room she was unwinding a skein of wool yarn to make a ball for her knitting, when I came in and asked her to tell me a certain fairy-tale.

Then when I was about five, my "big" sisters squirted Eau de Cologne on my apron and carelessly got some in my eye. What with the pain, my not having wanted the stuff in the first place, and my not being strong enough to fight off their solicitude I got so mad that I fainted in frustration! I resented being made a plaything.

Although it is possible that anyone reading this may already know the following particulars, I think this is the place to identify my siblings.

First my brothers:

Christian became a physician. His widow, Zora, is at this writing 94 and living in Bergen.

Gerhard and Anton became lawyers (barristers).

Waldemar and Danckert became engineers.

and my sisters were:

Therese who graduated at the Red Cross Hospital in Edinburgh as a trained nurse and later emigrated to New York.

Caroline (Caro, later Carrie) became a trained nurse in Stockholm and married Dr. Hjalmar Forssner.

Helene kept house for Waldemar, Danckert, and me in Stavanger, where she met Olaf Stokstad who became a missionary to Madagascar, and she married him there.

Cecilie (Cie, pronounced See'eh) took a commercial course and worked in a Christiania bank, then married John Landstad.

Mathilde was a great cook and housekeeper. She studied in Copenhagen, married Axel Beyer, and became active in a Domestic Science School in Bergen

There they are -- or were -- all ten. Because of studies and work in distant places, several of the eldest were rarely at Haa during my childhood.

The day's activities commenced quite early with the maid removing shoes and suits from the bedrooms and returning them after cleaning and brushing. She would also light the fires in the heating stoves during cold weather.

The short winter days gave us only about four hours of daylight, while in the summer there was bright sunlight before three o'clock in the morning, but whether by day or by lamplight breakfast at eight-thirty was a substantial and companionable meal. It started with Father reading a brief sermonette, the cook and the maid also being present at this ceremony. Then we had hot cereal, eggs -- or in the summer often -- fried trout, bread-and-butter with cheeses or cold cuts, coffee with fresh cream. And milk! Hot and skimmed cold, lukewarm direct from the milking (I hated that), and sometimes delicious buttermilk from our own churn, or sour hot milk that had turned into curds and whey!

I remember one breakfast late in this era. It was early October, the morning after the Sunday I had been confirmed by Father in the church. At our gathering Waldemar was missing. Such was unheard of, but it was learned that he had been seen fussing with his fishing rod at daybreak, so the meal went on without him. As we were at the point of rising from the table, in comes Waldemar carrying a 23 pound salmon he had taken on a fly, and apologizing for being late, but it had taken him a full hour to play and land the fish! He was duly forgiven, and we had the most delicious smoked salmon! This was the largest salmon I had ever seen caught in the river, although from our nets in the sea I remember one that was half again as large. Incidentally, for smoking our salmon and trout, hams and other meats, nettles were piled on the peat fires. It made a lovely smoke for the purpose. I don't know what was used in other parts of Norway.

After breakfast we had school in the schoolroom, and the groom had the horse and the "cariol" ready for Father's travel. This vehicle was light, consisting of a comfortable easy-chair type of seat, with the weight slightly in front of the wheel hubs, thus taking advantage of both springs and the resilient shafts for comfort. He had a footbag of sheepskin, wool inside, and a bearskin fur coat for days of raw and cold weather. Rain-gear was of course also a necessity.

Before my schooldays there had been hired women teachers at Haa, but then Caro took over. I do not know to what schools any of my sisters went, nor do I have any significant memories from Caro's tutoring, which was also bestowed upon Mathilde and Danckert, but I was always very fond of her.

I may mention here that except for Christian who graduated from a school in Bergen, my older brothers had attended the Cathedral School in

Stavanger, and when Danckert was twelve his turn had come. Father was then told by the headmaster that next year youngsters from the local public schools would be permitted, under a new scholarship scheme, to transfer to his school at what would normally be my age level, so he strongly advised Father to enter me in the grade following Danckert's. I do not know to what extent Father shared the headmaster's fear of "contamination", but he accepted the advice, with the result that from the time I was ten I was at Haa only during vacations and occasional long weekends, and I became at least one year younger than my classmates.

But back to the daily routine. Interrupted only by a snack at midmorning, school would last until about two o'clock, and I would then generally find Mother in the living room with some kind of handwork, the maid or my sisters having by then set the dinner table. Dinner at three was the rule if Father stayed home in the forenoon, but when he had been travelling, more often than not, Mother wanted everything to be ready as soon as possible after his return. She planned all the meals, but I do not recall ever seeing her do any cooking. Often she would lay down her handwork and go to the kitchen to tell Berthe, the cook, "The Pastor will be here in a few minutes," although there was no sign yet of Father, and it might be well ahead of the dinner time, but she was always right. In Norway popular belief has it that good people are accompanied by a benevolent or protective spirit called vardyr or fyreferd that follows or precedes them, recognizable by whoever is closely attuned to the person so attended. Mother's announcement was considered natural and always acted upon. The unfailing love, understanding, and consideration between Father and Mother put a stamp of cooperation and harmony on our entire household.

For our dinners, in addition to the food produced on the farm we also had fresh seafood the entire year. In the summer there was a steady supply of trout or salmon caught on flyrods, for that was our favorite sport, and year-round we obtained fresh cod, haddock, mackerel or pollock, also crabs and lobsters from fishermen a mile or so to the south. There was also a keg of salted herring which, with boiled potatoes, might almost be called a national Saturday dinner for the winter months.

Father was head of the public school system in the parish, so occasionally a teacher came to consult with him, and sometimes stayed for dinner. These teachers, who had one-room schools, were usually country educated themselves, sons of farmers who had gone to a Normal School and had then generally returned to their home districts.

There was a "traditional" tale told about one of these teachers, a dinner guest at Askevold, for Father headed the school system there also. For dessert there were delicate little pancakes with jam on them, and the platter was kept in circulation for refills. After a while Mother asked the guest if he would like some more pancakes, and he answered, "Thank you, Fru Holm, but I have had six already." Christian and Gerhard, immediately and in unison, "Six! He has had eleven!"

It was the good custom then in Norway, and I believe still is, after rising from the table to say "Tak for mat", which means thanks for the food. In those days in the countryside it was quite a formality, and a guest would say it while shaking the hostess' hand and looking her in the eye. Well, Mother never made fun of anybody, but there was one teacher-guest who to his thanks added, "I must say it was a frugal meal." The emphasis on the key word clearly showed that he meant the opposite, as Mother in relating the incident added that she thought it had been a particularly good one. The danger in using unfamiliar words, this one probably found in a translated English novel!

Mathilde's special job was to take care of our flock of chickens, but cooking became her early main interest. Following the usual custom, meat was carved in the kitchen and brought to the table on platters, followed by vegetable dishes, gravy bowls etc., to be passed for each to serve him or her self. One time when she was quite young and we had important guests for dinner, it was Mathilde's job to see that the serving dishes were kept filled. She kept going to the kitchen and returning with full platters and dishes until she entered with a last one, declaring, "Well, Mother, now there isn't any more!"

Following Father's after-dinner nap there would be coffee or tea, with various activities following. Somebody would drive to Naerbo to deliver the day's boxed catch of salmon to the railway depot and do the necessary purchasing at the General Store. I often went with Waldemar on this errand. There were several gates across the road to keep the cattle and sheep from straying, and often the farmer's youngster would see us and come running to open the gate and receive a small gratuity. I remember a farmer once asked Waldemar how much he gave the child for this service. When told that he gave a copper coin, the man shook his head and said that was too much. "I give them a prune." Generosity was rarely a fault among Father's parishioners.

Between our house and the river's estuary there was a high point overlooking the landscape and the shore where a small enclosure had been

built of stone, inside about eight feet square. Opposite the entrance was a hollowed out stone seat, and on one side was a flat stone about fifteen inches square. We were sure there were runes on it although it was mossgrown. To the east of this enclosure there were several small mounds of stone. We had no doubt that these mounds marked graves from viking times, and it seemed logical that the enclosure had religious significance, probably relating to the funerals. Danckert and I often went there, and we thought of digging into the mounds. But it would have been a big undertaking for two small boys, and we figured that anything in the graves, either bones or weapons, would have disintegrated. I do not know if some archeologist has more recently taken an interest in this, but I remember seeing later in Stavanger Museum a sword found in a viking grave which was so rusted away that it was hardly recognizable. I am sure there was much strife thereabouts. Erik the Red, Leif's father, who was expelled from Norway for a murder, came from Jaeren.

The parishioners were hard-working honorable people, but they were quite narrow-minded. For instance, my parents had no objection to card playing but requested their children to refrain so as not to offend the parish, for in spite of our rather secluded location any observable activities at the parsonage would be observed and reported by the people working there. Danckert and I did not learn to play cards until our schooldays in Stavanger, but there were rainy afternoons when older brothers and friends had a quiet game of Whist in a bedroom behind locked door and drawn windowshade. Incidentally, after my parents' move to Urskog we played cards openly, for the parishioners there would otherwise have thought us narrowminded.

As for our social life, the parish did not contribute to it, and my parents welcomed visits by relatives or friends, especially during the summer months which could be delightful. We used to be amused by Father who often would ask the guest, "When do you have to leave?" almost upon the guest's arrival, an easily misunderstood question. Father always wished for as long a stay as possible — my later good friend, Francis Bull, used to say that my father was the kindest man in the world — but he wanted to be sure that he could accomodate the guest's wishes, particularly regarding transportation.

These guests came from all over Norway, and each section of the country had its own lingual inflection, which even in our tender years Danckert and I noticed, and many times we would find a secluded spot and amuse ourselves

by imitating the inflection of a current guest. I have no doubt but that this ear for language contributed to my facility for proper pronunciation when studying foreign languages.

Mother was very interested in the world at large, particularly in distant places with exotic names strange peoples and customs. We had a large atlas, and I recall delightful afternoons when I was quite small. She would take me on her lap, and we would "travel" to Persia and India, Africa and many other parts of the globe. She had read about the Pacific Isles, and wondered what "breadfruit" was.. I don't know if that question was ever properly answered.

While Danckert did not care for fishing, I was very fond of it, particularly for the sea-trout that shared the salmon's urge to spawn in the river. This fly-fishing was done from a boat in the estuary, and when we had a large catch, the trout was smoked and made a delicious dinner. One day I handled the oars for Waldemar who caught forty two in a little over one hour, but this was unique. The trout and salmon would wait for a good rain to enter the swollen river. One summer the rain was late, and I told Waldemar that I believed the trout were waiting in the bay where we kept the large rowboat for the salmon nets. He quite reluctantly tried his luck there -- nobody had ever heard of fly-fishing in salt water -- and caught a dozen beauties!

Our dinner at eight was usually a simple meal with bread-and-butter, cheeses and cold cuts and a beverage. Once a farmer neighbor from across the river stayed for supper and when asked if he would like tea or milk, declared, "I want tea. I can get milk at home." But occasionally we would have a more elaborate hot supper, perhaps because the dinner had been somewhat skimpy, or to honor special guests.

Once a year, during the Christmas vacation, Father would gather all the teachers in the parish for their annual reports and a chance for them to discuss shared problems. Christian and Gerhard greatly enjoyed these gatherings (which ended with a particularly tasty supper), for they found their discussions with some of these men highly entertaining. There was evidenced, for instance, an unbelievable ignorance of modern science, as when one of them proclaimed a complete disbelief in the existence of microbes, for he had never seen any. There are still plenty of people who believe that if it isn't in the bible, it can't be true.

During my childhood days the railways connecting Christiania with Bergen did not exist, and it was also prior to automobiles and the decent roads that now serve them. All traffic between the capital and these towns

was by daily coastwise steamer, these ships calling at all the coastal ports en route to discharge and load passengers, mail, and cargo. Every day one ship passed us in each direction, and we enjoyed watching them through binoculars, particularly in stormy weather when the pitching was so bad that the propeller kept appearing above water and progress was slow. These ships were not large, and the passengers would engage only a bunk, not an entire cabin. Once my Uncle Danckert went to sleep in one of these bunks, at the time being alone in the cabin. When waking up the next morning, he saw a rough looking stranger at the washstand brushing his teeth. After close inspection, Uncle said, "Pardon me, but you are using my toothbrush". The stranger replied, "I am so sorry, I thought it was the ship's toothbrush."

Some years later, Christian was introduced to a stranger on such a coastal voyage, and when the stranger asked him if he was in any way related to Advocat Gerhard Holm, Christian assumed a far-away pensive look and after a suitable pause replied, "Oh yes, he is a distant brother of mine." That was distinctly Christian's type of humor.

Gerhard had a fine talent in music, and he was also very capable with his hands. He cannot have been over twelve when he made a violin for himself. When Grandfather Gløersen heard of it, he gave Gerhard a nice violin he had himself used in his youth and also had him take proper lessons. Gerhard became a very good amateur violinist. For Edvard Grieg's first performance in Christiania of his symphony, I believe it was in 1897, capable amateurs were tested as volunteers to enlarge the symphony orchestra, and Gerhard was there under Grieg's direction. We dearly loved his playing during vacations at Haa, as well as his sketching and painting, in which he was also very talented.

One of the coastal steamers might bring Christian and Gerhard home from their studies in Christiania for the Christmas holidays; we always hoped that they could share with us that festive season. Preparations had been going on at a great pace. The house was, as the saying goes, swept and garnished, meats of various kinds were processed, and the baking of all sorts of delicious Christmas cookies kept all hands busy.

The great celebration was on Christmas Eve. After Father's reading of the Christmas Evangel, there was the lighted tree around which we walked holding hands and singing the traditional and well loved carols, Father and Mother sitting at one side watching us with smiling faces. Then the presents were distributed, and after a lively and delicious supper there were games and other forms of happiness. We had a favorite guessing game. One person

was chosen to leave the room and a subject was selected. The questions had to be put in such a form that they could be answered by a yes or a no. One time, it must have been the first time I was considered "big" enough to ask the questions, an "easy" subject was chosen. My first question was, "Does it belong to the animal kingdom?" When the answer was yes, I said, "Ha-ha, it's Danckert!" And it was.

We did not have Christmas stockings but an equivalent. On Christmas morning we found a small basket by the bed containing figs, raisins, almonds, an apple, and an orange for happy morning munching.

There was a tradition started by chance in our family which I understand has been carried on through the generations in Norway and has spread to some other families. When Christian was quite small, he was discovered by Grandmother Holm holding onto a "family size" Christmas loaf (somewhat like the German stolle) and attacking it with his teeth. She said, "Bless you, I'll see that you get your own loaf next Christmas", and from then on she provided a loaf for each member of the family, first appearing at tea-time on Christmas Day, and this was continued by Mother after her death. Each one carved his or her initials on the loaf, they were gathered into a large basket for reappearance as many days as the owner chose to prolong consumption. I have already mentioned that there were generally cold cuts on our breakfast table. On Christmas morning each found an individual Pressed Mutton Roll beside his breakfast plate, for his bread-and-butter during the Holidays. Our Grandmother Gløersen, who lived in Trondheim, sent us a barrel for Christmas with presents for all. On the bottom was a reindeer steak, which had been properly "seasoned" on the way, and it usually made a wonderful main course for Christmas dinner. Only too soon did this festive season come to an end and all returned to his or her stage in life's progression.

I think "the pursuit of happiness" is an unfortunate expression, because its presence in the Constitution makes it something of a command, and because such a "pursuit" -- in the popular sense of pressing for personal pleasures -- is a will-o-the-wisp undertaking. Childhood is generally described as and assumed to be years of happiness, and I wish it were also true for all those who have not written about it. Unfortunately it is not, but the love and trust between Father and Mother, and their unfailing devotion to the well-being and harmonious development of their children created in us confidence and gratitude as well as lasting memories of a happy childhood that few have had the privilege to enjoy.